

Foster Care Association of Victoria Position:

Gay and lesbian individuals and couples have always been a valued part of home based carers in Victoria. However, in response to increased need for foster carer and insufficient numbers of foster carers over recent years, many CSO's have begun to work more and more with individuals and couples who might have been traditionally overlooked. Today many of Victoria's CSO's are actively recruiting foster carers from the gay and lesbian communities.

The Department of Human Services and the peak body for CSO's (the Centre for Excellence In Child and Family Welfare) are committed to assisting CSO's and their staff in examining their current practice in relation to gay and lesbian carers in the desire for improved recruitment figures and better assessment and support of this carer group.

Research continues to demonstrate that gay and lesbian parents engage in family making practices that result in supportive and caring environments for children. Research has moved beyond notions of negative stereotypes and recognises the unique and specific strengths of gay and lesbian headed families.

The FCAV has the expectation that **all** carers will be assessed and accredited to care for children in an open and transparent process, absent of any discriminatory beliefs or practices.

The Legal Context

Gay and lesbian individuals and couples are welcomed to apply to become foster, kinship or permanent carers in Victoria. The law pertaining to adoption is more complex, requiring applicants to be a married or de facto couple consisting of a male and female except in 'exceptional circumstances'. Full explanations of the Victorian and Federal laws as they relate to Gay and lesbian carers can be found in the *Rainbow Families and the Law – an information kit for same sex couples and single people in Victoria - 2010*. This document can be downloaded at www.rainbowfamilies.com.au.

Bullying of young people by peers is of course not exclusive to children with GLBTI carers or parents. Children and young people can bully others for any reason which they determine differentiates the victim from the bully. For children and young people living in out of home care these could include teasing about the issues of abuse or neglect which have resulted in the child being placed in care or indeed the fact that they are unable to live at home. If you then include the list of general taunts about physical appearance and intellect, this can have a huge impact on the self esteem and mental health of an already emotionally vulnerable child or young person.

Bullying

Bullying of young people with GLBTI carers or parents can be an issue in some families and it is important to understand that GLBTI people are not 'responsible' for this bullying. Ensuring a safe community for gay and lesbian headed families is a whole of community responsibility and requires open discussions and often multi faceted interventions from across the community. In the case of GLBTI carers it might be appropriate to involve CSO and DHS case workers, school administrators and other influential members of the local community to assist in addressing bullying behaviours and discriminatory attitudes. In some extreme cases it might be appropriate to involve police or the broader legal system. The best defence to bullying is ensuring open communication and a community committed to a zero tolerance approach to responding to bullies and their behaviours.

Support

There are many opportunities to receive support if you are a gay and lesbian carer. Many of these supports are offered to all carers irrespective of sexuality or gender however others are specifically tailored to meet the needs of the gay and lesbian communities. These include:

- ✓ **Your CSO or DHS case worker** – Each carer family is allocated a highly trained case worker who has the job of ensuring that carers are comprehensively assessed, adequately trained and well supervised and supported. In most cases this is the person to whom carers would first approach for support. Your case worker may also suggest that you seek additional opportunities for specialist support. In cases where you are unable to access adequate support from you case worker you may consider contacting their team leader or manager.
- ✓ The **FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service (CISS)** provides information, support and advocacy for all foster, kinship and permanent carers, and adoptive parents across Victoria. The phone line operates from 9am to 5pm Mondays to Thursdays and 9am to 4pm on Fridays. Carers can also register queries or concerns via the 'online enquiry' option on the website, www.fcav.org.au. Call **9489 9770** if you need support.

- ✓ **The Gay and Lesbian Carer Support Group** – This group operates with the assistance of carer volunteers who offer regular social activities for Victorian carers and the children in their care. The group also provides opportunities for carers to seek friendship and advice from experienced carers. The group has members from all over Victoria and produces a newsletter twice per year. Carers wanting to join the group can contact Tracey at traceyandsam@aapt.net.au.
- ✓ The **Rainbow Families Council** is a large volunteer group of gay and lesbian parents, carers and supporters who seek to respond to the needs of rainbow families living in Victoria. They are responsible for organising regular conferences and much of the political lobby pertaining to gay and lesbian headed families while also being contemporary in their knowledge of the legislation as it affects gay and lesbian carers. Their website offers links to research, support and social groups and comprehensive book lists for both adults and children. The Rainbow Families Council respect the diversity within gay and lesbian headed families and as such are inclusive and responsive toward kinship, foster, permanent and adoptive carers and their children. To learn more, go to www.rainbowfamilies.org.au.
- ✓ The **Rainbow Playgroups Network** are many playgroups specifically for rainbow families operating weekly in the Melbourne Metropolitan area. Playgroups serve many functions enabling parents to discuss issues affecting their families in an informal way and also allow children to establish relationships with others who come from similar families. Such groups reflect and support diversity within the community and as a result many family constellations are represented. The network also produces a quarterly newsletter with playgroup updates and invitations to State-wide social functions for Rainbow families with children of all ages. Those wishing to know more can contact Tracey on 0427 811 186 or email <mailto:traceyandsam@aapt.net.au>.
- ✓ **Gay Dads Australia** is a comprehensive website established by gay dads, to support gay men who are planning or are already parents. The website provides access to a range of information relevant to gay dads and gay carers specifically. The group also operate an online discussion group accessible by those who complete their free registration. Go to www.gaydadsaustralia.com.au to learn more.

Printed and web-based resources

There is a comprehensive support group list available in the '*Guidelines for recruiting and supporting Gay and Lesbian Carers*' by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. It provides a good understanding of gay and lesbian foster care in Victoria and has an appendix of comprehensive resources. This free resource is available from the Centre by calling. **9614 1577** order online at www.cfecfw.asn.au.

'Who is in your family?' is a comprehensive resource kit for gay and lesbian parents and carers comprising several fact sheets which can be given to childcare and pre-school providers to assist them to appropriately respond to the needs of children parented by gay men and lesbians. The website also has several coloured posters which represent a variety of family structures appropriate for display in educational, welfare and health settings as well as in family homes. These posters and fact sheets can be downloaded for free at <http://www.rainbowfamilies.org.au/pages/information/who-is-in-your-family-resource-kit.php>

Children's Booklists – The Rainbow families Council has three booklists to download which detail books reflecting the diversity of gay and lesbian headed families. The *Hares and Hyenas Bookstore Booklist – books for Rainbow families, June 2010* was compiled by the gay and lesbian bookstore at 63 Johnson St, Fitzroy (ph 03 9495 6589), and includes short reviews of the selected titles. To view these booklists please access the Rainbow Families Council website at www.rainbowfamilies.org.au.

What if I don't have time for groups but still would like to network

There is a great mailing list that allows you to receive contact sheets, family and group updates and invitations for family days. Family days are great for families with older children who are not of playgroup age. They are also great if you wish to maintain or form new social networks. Those wishing to join can email traceyandsam@aapt.net.au to be added to the mailing list.

Rainbow Families also has an e-group that is an email based discussion group for lesbians and gay men who are prospective or current parents and their children. The group is also for supporters of rainbow families including health, legal, welfare and support agencies and individuals. Questions about the *Rainbow Families e-group* can be forwarded to rainbowfamiliesvic-owner@yahoogroups.com.